



	<b>Loudoun County Government Administrative Policies and Procedures</b>	
	<b>Title:</b> Media Relations Policy and Procedures	<b>Effective Date:</b> September 1, 2015 (Created May 23, 2012)
	<b>Number:</b> COMM-01	<b>Date Last Reviewed/Revised:</b> September 1, 2015 <b>Date of Next Review:</b> August 31, 2017

**Purpose:**

To establish policies and procedures for (1) establishing approved spokespersons; (2) contacting the media; (3) coordinating timely and accurate responses to media inquiries; and (4) documenting contacts with the media.

**Background:**

Members of the news media include representatives from television, radio, newspapers, magazines, websites, blogs, and other entities that report news and information to the public through a broad range of communication channels. Loudoun County Government recognizes that members of the news media regularly contact various departments and the administration during the course of reporting on County operations, programs, and services; therefore, the County aims to ensure responses to members of the media are coordinated, timely, and accurate. All media inquiries generally require some type of response. Requests for records from members of the media, regardless of the format in which the request is received, should be responded to in accordance with the Virginia Freedom of Information Act. This policy also provides a framework for proactively engaging the media in an effort to inform and educate Loudoun County residents.

**Policy:**

The Office of Public Affairs and Communications (PAC), on behalf of the County Administrator, is responsible for the County's media relations, including developing and implementing County-wide media relations policies and procedures.

All Loudoun County employees should adhere to the policies and procedures outlined in this document; however, should Constitutional Officers or department heads of state agencies choose to deviate from any portion of the policy or media relations procedures, the Constitutional Officers or State Department Head should notify the County Administrator and Public Affairs and Communications Officer about variations.

## **A. COUNTY SPOKESPERSONS**

**1. County Spokesperson** The Public Affairs and Communications Officer or designee acts as the County's official spokesperson, as designated by the County Administrator. In this capacity, the

Public Affairs and Communications Officer or designee, in consultation with the County's subject matter experts, responds to inquiries from the news media regarding official County policies, positions, announcements, personnel issues, crisis management, emergency situations, fiscal operations, and other matters which reflect on the standing of the County. When three or more County departments are involved in a single issue/incident, the Public Affairs and Communications Officer will serve as spokesperson or designate a spokesperson for the issue/incident.

### **2. Designated Spokespersons**

County staff may not speak on behalf of the county or on behalf of their department to members of the media, unless designated as a spokesperson by their department head. It is recognized that department staff hold expertise in various fields and may, therefore, be appropriate spokespersons. Therefore, exceptions regarding departmental spokespersons may be made at the discretion of the department head, and in consultation with the Public Affairs and Communications Officer when appropriate. Unless otherwise authorized, the County's designated spokespersons are limited to:

- Elected Officials and their designees
  - County Administrator
  - County Attorney
  - Assistant County Administrators
  - Public Affairs and Communications Officer or Designee
  - Department Heads or Designee(s)
  - Departmental Communicators (See Section A, 3 below)
  - Budget Officer
  - Human Resources Officer
  - Legislative Affairs Liaison
- i. Designated spokespersons as defined above may respond directly to media inquiries without first consulting PAC if the media inquiry involves information within their scope of responsibility and expertise. All media contacts should be reported to PAC as described below in Section C (Documenting Inquiries) in a timely fashion.
  - ii. To ensure the County's ability to maintain effective media relations, all designated spokespersons who will not be available during normal business hours and outside of normal business hours for extended periods of time (e.g., during leave), should: (1) designate an alternate contact for PAC; (2) provide the alternate's name and contact information to PAC in advance via email; and (3) designate whether the alternate contact is authorized to speak to the media.

**3. Departmental Communicators**

Some County departments may have professional communicators on staff. These positions typically have titles such as Public Information Officer, Marketing Manager, Communications Director, Communications Specialists, etc. Departmental Communicators, by definition in this policy, are designated as spokespersons at the time of their hiring by their department heads. Therefore, these professional communicators are included among the county's designated spokespersons and may perform day-to-day media relations activities for their departments without first consulting PAC, except where noted.

- i. Departmental Communicators may be required to follow additional department-specific procedures that are not specified in this policy.
- ii. Departmental Communicators are limited to *(this list does not include departments headed by constitutional officers)*:
  - Economic Development
  - Fire, Rescue & Emergency Management
  - Loudoun County Public Libraries
  - Parks, Recreation and Community Services
- iii. Departments that choose to establish a departmental communicator or plan to assign a member of its staff to a full-time role in media relations, should do so in consultation with the Public Affairs and Communications Officer and include the PAC Officer or designee on interview panels when appropriate.

**B. MEDIA INQUIRIES 1. Day-to-Day Responses**

- i. Inquiries from the media are given a high priority and an appropriate response should be coordinated as quickly and as efficiently as possible by:
  - o PAC or its designee;
  - o Department heads or designees; or
  - o Departmental communicators.
- ii. Whenever possible, every effort should be made to meet media's deadlines for non-emergency inquiries during regular business hours and to ensure that all information released to the media is public and accurate. Because the media often work on tight deadlines, it is important that all departments respond as soon as possible when PAC requests department information or requests an approved subject matter expert to speak with the media.
- iii. If contacted directly by the media, prior to responding, all Loudoun County employees who are not spokespersons as defined above should refer the inquiry to PAC, to their department head or designees, or to their departmental communicators.
  - Department heads may approve employees who receive simple inquiries regarding factual information that is publically available (e.g., hours of operation; addresses; names, titles, and contact information of staff; department policies and procedures in general terms; meeting times and locations; etc.), to respond to the media immediately; the response should include only factual information and not personal opinions, commentary, or information outside the employee's scope of expertise.
    - o Employees who are unable to answer any media inquiry should refer the inquiry to PAC, to their department heads or designee, or to

their departmental communicators. ○ Employees who respond to media inquiries should immediately inform PAC, their department head or designee, or their departmental communicators so that the inquiry can be documented in accordance with Section C below.

- iv. Members of the media frequently cite County sources in news reports without contacting the source by taking information that is stated by staff during public events, e.g., Board of Supervisors meetings. These types of “media contacts” are unavoidable because the media has the right to cover public events and therefore no prior approval is required from PAC or department heads. Staff, however, should exercise good judgment and speak carefully whenever representing the County at public events.
- v. All non-emergency media inquiries received by staff outside of normal business hours (i.e., Monday–Friday, 8:30 a.m.–5 p.m.) should be referred to the Public Affairs and Communications Officer or designee, to their department head or designee, or to their departmental communicators, who will determine whether a response outside of normal business hours is required, or whether a response may be provided on the next business day.

## **2. Multi-Department Coordination**

i. When three or more County departments are involved in an issue/incident, the Public Affairs and Communications Officer or designee will assume the lead role in coordinating the release of public information to all media inquiries. PAC will be responsible for coordinating information and responding to the media, or designating spokesperson(s) to respond on behalf of the County. ii. Departments that receive media inquiries that require input from two or more other departments should immediately notify PAC prior to responding.

## **3. Referring Inquiries to PAC**

i. Spokespersons may request that the Public Affairs and Communications Officer respond to any media inquiry on their behalf. Subject matter experts must support the response by providing appropriate information. ii. Spokespersons should exercise good judgment in all media responses and are responsible for determining when County Administration should be informed immediately and/or involved in responses to media inquiries, e.g., regarding issues that are urgent, controversial, require situational awareness, etc. All media inquiries that meet the following criteria should be referred to the Public Affairs and Communications Officer or designee:

- **Institutional Questions:** When designated spokespersons are asked to comment or provide information on an institutional question—an issue that relates to the entire organization—designated spokespersons should refer the inquiry to Public Affairs and Communications Officer or designee for a coordinated response that is representative of the official County position.
- **Controversial Issues:** When a department receives a media inquiry regarding sensitive or controversial issues, the department should immediately refer the inquiry to the Public Affairs and Communications Officer or designee and to the employee’s department head or designee, if

not already involved. The Public Affairs and Communications Officer or designee will coordinate a response in consultation with the County Administrator, Assistant County Administrators, County Attorney, and department heads, as appropriate.

- **Litigation, Personnel, and Elections Issues:** Generally, the business conducted by the County is public, and therefore, is public information under the Virginia Freedom of Information Act (VFOIA); however, inquiries regarding information such as pending litigation, matters involving a significant exposure to litigation, and certain personnel-related information are exceptions. Inquiries regarding pending litigation or exposure to litigation, and personnel-related information should be referred to the Public Affairs and Communications Officer or designee. The Public Affairs and Communications Officer or designee will then notify the County Administrator, County Attorney and/or the Human Resources Officer, as warranted, and coordinate an appropriate response. Inquiries regarding elections and campaign issues should be referred to the Public Affairs and Communications Officer or designee to coordinate an appropriate response with County Administration and the Office of Elections, as warranted.

### **C. DOCUMENTING INQUIRIES**

1. The County should record all interactions with the media to collect a broad range of metrics that inform media relations policies and activities. Coordinating the collection and reporting of this information is the responsibility of the Office of Public Affairs and Communications.
2. To ensure all media inquiries are properly documented, staff who respond to media requests should document all media inquiries by completing a brief online media inquiry form, which is posted online at [www.loudoun.gov/mediaform](http://www.loudoun.gov/mediaform). A link to the form is available on the Employee Intranet, through the Public Affairs and Communications page. A hand-written, paper version of the form may be submitted to PAC if an employee prefers (requests for paper forms may be submitted to PAC or printed form the Employee Intranet). Alternate methods of reporting may be developed in collaboration with PAC.
3. Media inquiries should be documented as soon as possible after the inquiry is resolved.

### **D. EMERGENCY/CRISIS COMMUNIAION**

1. This policy works within the framework established by the Loudoun County Emergency Operations Plan. The *Emergency Support Function (ESF)–15 External Affairs Annex* provides guidance and direction to designate the agencies that are responsible for providing incident-specific public information during a significant event.
2. Loudoun County’s Emergency Operations Center has four activation levels: (1) Not Activated; (2) Monitoring; (3) Partial Activation; and (4) Full Activation. During “full activations” of the Emergency Operations Center (EOC), all County spokespersons should discontinue day-to-day media relations activities for the

duration of the activation and coordinate the release of all public information to the media through the designated Public Information Officer (PIO) or the Joint Information Center (JIC), if activated.

3. If the County activates an Emergency Hotline, all media inquiries received through the hotline should be referred to the designated PIO or JIC.

#### **E. CONTACTING THE MEDIA**

1. All proactive contacts to members of the media should be initiated by PAC, by department heads or their designees, or by departmental communicators. This includes issuing news releases and media advisories; letters to the editors in which the County is represented; hosting news conferences or round tables; and personal contacts with reporters to pitch story ideas.
2. Staff seeking publicity for events or activities must contact PAC, their department head or their designees, or their departmental communicators with reasonable advanced notice to ensure the County adheres to appropriate media relations practices.
3. All county news releases must be published by PAC or by departmental communicators (listed in Section A, 3 above) using approved communication channels and media distribution lists.
  - i. Departments requesting support writing and publishing news releases should contact PAC at least three business days in advance when possible, and provide all of the relevant facts to aid PAC in drafting the release.
  - ii. Department heads or their designees should be informed by the sponsors of new releases about the content of all news releases prior to publishing them.
4. PAC will maintain a media distribution list to include (1) name of media outlet and/or individual; (2) email addresses; and (3) phone numbers, if available. The County will use this list during day-to-day and emergency notifications to the media. The email distribution list will be tested on an annual basis by PAC to identify outdated information.

#### **F. PERSONAL POINTS OF VIEW**

1. Loudoun County Administration recognizes that all employees have the right to express their personal points of view regarding any issue. Employees should recognize that as County employees, their personal points of view may be perceived by members of the media and public as an official representation of the County's point of view. Because personal points of view may conflict with the County's official policy, employees should not inadvertently speak on behalf of the County when exercising their free speech by adhering to the following practices:
  - i. County employees who choose to contact or to write personal letters to the editor of any media organization should not use official County stationary or County email.
  - ii. When identifying themselves in any personal communication to a media organization, County employees should not use their County titles or otherwise identify their affiliation with their department or the County. In the event a County employee is recognized by the media as an employee of

the County, he or she should include language that states the views set forth in the communication do not represent the views of the County, but rather, are the employee's personally held opinions. Similar disclaimers must be given if an employee addresses a public meeting; is interviewed for radio, internet, or television programs; and posts comments online, such as on social media sites, in response to blog posts, or in response to online news articles.

#### **G. SOCIAL MEDIA**

1. Policies and procedures regarding to the use of and participation in social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, etc.) by County employees are highlighted in the County's Social Media Policy.
2. Departments that utilize social media must recognize that members of the media monitor the County's social media sites for information and therefore the County's social media administrators are de facto spokespersons. As a result, department heads or departmental communicators must approve all social media administrators and assume responsibility for all content that is posted by their departments.
3. All media inquiries that result from a social media posts must be handled in accordance with this policy.

#### **Contact Information:**

Public Affairs and Communications Main Line (During Regular Business Hours): 703-777-0113.

#### **Glen Barbour, Public Affairs and Communications**

**Officer** glen.barbour@loudoun.gov; Office: 703-771-5086;

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#### **Emily Watkins, Public Affairs Manager**

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#### **Responsible Departments**

Policy Issues: County Administration/Public Affairs and Communications Procedures:

County Administration/Public Affairs and Communications

***This policy remains in effect until revised or rescinded.***